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Review of *Art in the After-Culture: Capitalist Crisis & Cultural Strategy* by Ben Davis (Haymarket Books)

by Tennae Maki | Book Reviews, Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT The eight essays in Ben Davis' *Art in the After-Culture* are centered on the interchanges between cultural production and economic development in contemporary society. Largely told through the lens of leftist aesthetic theory, the book pushes against exploitative notions of capitalist systems and ambitions towards decentralization. Davis likens art to a "survival kit" and advocates for creative practitioners to strategically influence the direction of society.

KEYWORDS activism, aesthetics, art, capitalism, cultural production, democracy

Art in the After-Culture: Capitalist Crisis & Cultural Strategy. By Ben Davis. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2022. pp 272 (paperback) ISBN 978-1-64259-462-1. US List $19.95.

Ben Davis' *Art in the After-Culture: Crisis & Cultural Strategy* is a collection of essays about existing demands placed on art production and the critical potential cultural practitioners, including Marina Abramović and Nike Inc., have in determining society's direction. The book is weighted with political nuance and institutional critique ranging from general Marxism to questions of exclusivity and accessibility. While marketed towards general art audiences, the book definitely seems to hang closer to conventions instigated by the New York art world. Nevertheless, issuances of visual art are used as a mould to shape contemporary

debates surrounding social discourse and modes of restructuring in the wake of recent cataclysmic events, or in the “after culture” (1).

Critical engagements with patterns of legislative and economic power are seamlessly woven into the book. These are used as entry points into cultural analysis and are proven to be all the more appropriate when considering the hallmarks of visual art’s current orientation towards politics, technology, and exclusivity. Davis situates these topics of interest as being contributing factors in the democratization of culture. This point is carried throughout the book, demonstrating that the line between mass accessibility and exceptionalism is in a fragile state. Access has dismantled hierarchies and jostled gatekeepers.

Davis doesn’t necessarily position democratization as a good thing for culture. Throughout the book’s eight chapters, he is at odds with both the implications of capitalism and technology’s stronghold on global north societies. He does not seem optimistic about the trajectory of art and culture, either. Rather, Davis muses over whether or not art has become more or less visible and important to the many social factions amid globalization.

He opens this discussion in the first essay, “Connoisseurship and Critique.” For those engaged with the art world, it is probably the most accessible essay; a way to ease the reader into familiar yet discursive territory. Davis ties historicizations over the virtues of viewing a work of art outside of decorative and patronised contexts to the near aesthetic function served by romanticizing the modern artist. These ideations are rooted in capitalism, relegated to quandaries over authorship, and are used to contextualise today’s class stratification.

Class and mass cultural nuances are explored further in the second essay, “Elite Capture and Radical Chic,” particularly as they relate to the proclivity of art institutions. Davis maintains that these spaces are limited by the hands that feed them, the economic elite, which is antithetical to the common ethos of circulating art to communities.. Supported by several case studies and initiatives instigated

by the political left in the last century, such as Hans Haacke's actions against the Guggenheim and the ACT UP campaign, he argues that museums have an eccentric social placement that needs to be incubated to better serve emergent cultural movements.

Davis breaks open the "smartphone society" seal in the third essay, "The Art World and the Culture Network." Stopping short of the digressive rhetoric of decentralization adopted by those engaged in blockchain, he presents views on democratization via technology on and off the Internet. He laments the "artertainment" that has been normalised across museums and Instagram profiles, worrying that art is competing against culture rather than alongside it. Davis recalls that over the last decade art spaces shifted from attempts to curb smartphone usage to encouraging the implementation of hashtags and the like. The notion that technology has disrupted the plausibility of a sanctioned visual art colloquy is examined further in the fourth essay, "AI Aesthetics and Capitalism," which converges on how capitalism will inform art's displacement with the impending aesthetic contributions of Artificial Intelligence. He writes, "it is urgent that the conversation move from whether it (AI) will create "art" to what kind of art it will create and how it does or does not fit with what we want art to be" (92).

Generative art is characterized as rudimentary art, something that is substantive of Silicon Valley. Davis compares this impediment to the historical conventions defined by critics in the last century, which affirmed the need for successful art to be attached to both context and narrative. This lapse in meaning is said to be reflective of perceptions of novelty and convenience, from which the fundamental understanding of art is threatened. The fifth essay "The Anarchist in the Network," examines these perceptions of technology further with a discussion on modes of disintermediation and digital activism. Davis deflates glorifications of gatekeeper elimination with the same manner of proof that he used in the previous chapter; cultural standards would flounder without intermediaries.

Themes related to these principles are carried through to the sixth essay, “Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Materialism.” Davis starts by tackling one of the most controversial issues presently among culturists: standards and practices of appropriation and materialism. He compares the relations of cultural personhood to ones of power and capitalist hegemony. Surging demands to collect profits from cultural products are placed within the yields of exploited identities, might these be motivated by minority groups, class systems, or otherwise. The crisis of cultural identity is cross examined against conspiracy theories in the book’s seventh essay, “The Mirror of Conspiracy.” Davis uses aesthetic theory to investigate the political and knowledge seeking dimensions of the public. He suggests that the need for moral purpose has propelled levels of rightward extremism to the forefront, of which it might not be retractable.

The final essay, “Art and Ecotopia,” of *Art in the After-Culture* addresses contemporary environmentalism. Davis focuses on how art has been used as a utility of climate activation, from warning guides to presenting ideal planetary utopias. He casts doubt that artists might emerge as real changemakers. However, he cites that it is the very promise of change that could be interpreted as a survival skill, a much-needed contribution towards collective thought.

The author makes that contribution himself with this book. *Art in the After-Culture* could be interpreted as a manual, one that presents a complex narrative, demonstrating how art is found between the crevasses of cultural and economic life. His choice in bridging aesthetic thought with political skepticism reaffirms the significant potential availed through the ways of seeing. Careful symmetries drawn between noted art writers, from John Berger to Lawrence Alloway, rightly affirms Davis’ place within the canon of cultural criticism.

Davis doesn’t deviate from his agenda. Nor does he stray from his intended audience, those who are “located somewhere between creaking cultural institutions and volatile leftist cultural debates” (7). This is helpful in the matter of

maintaining a clear point of view through the mosaic of case studies and theories found in the book, although it might also be perceived as a disservice to the reader. It would have been compelling if he had optioned to complicate the arguments, as opposed to promoting the same progressive script most in the cultural industries have become familiar with. Arguments for a new socio-economic agenda need not be so well rehearsed.

With that being said, this book would be well suited for industry professionals, policymakers, and academics with a vested interest in how visual culture has and will impact economic discourse in the United States and beyond. Economists and creative practitioners alike would benefit from the ways in which Davis endorses art as a vessel to transpose meaning in material ways. As is reaffirmed throughout the book, society is at a pressure point, in the *after-culture*, almost definitely. Radical change is placed on a pedestal, as is the suggestion that meaning in art works better when there is diversity of thought looking for it.

Author Information

Tennae Maki

Tennae Maki is a PhD candidate with the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds. Her research centers on art production through the lens of value creation and generative capital within the public domain. It builds upon her interest in establishing a new frameworks for artistic autonomy and ownership through perspectives of a global economy. She is also a contributor to the Brooklyn Rail.

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